

## “The Pleasure of the Pain: Why some people need S&M”

[Psychology Today](#)

September/October 1999

By [Marianne Apostolides](#)

Bind my ankles with your white cotton rope so I cannot walk. Bind my wrists so I cannot push you away. Place me on the bed and wrap your rope tighter around my skin so it grips my flesh. Now I know that struggle is useless, that I must lie here and submit to your mouth and tongue and teeth, your hands and words and whims. I exist only as your object. Exposed...

Of every 10 people who reads these words, one or more has experimented with sadomasochism (S&M), which is most popular among educated, middle- and upper-middle-class men and women, according to psychologists and ethnographers who have studied the phenomenon. [Charles Moser, Ph.D., M.D., of the institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco](#), has researched S&M to learn the motivation behind it—to understand why in the world people would ask to be bound, whipped and flogged. The reasons are as surprising as they are varied.

For James, the desire became apparent when he was a child playing war games—he always hoped to be captured. “I was frightened that I was sick,” he says. But now, he adds, as a well-seasoned player on the scene, “I thank the leather gods I found this community.”

At first the scene found him. When he was at a party in professor chose him. She brought him home and tied him up, how bad he was for having these desires, even as she fulfilled them. For the first time he felt what he had only imagined, what he had read about in every S&M book he could find.

James, a father and manager, has a Type A personality—in-control, hard-working, intelligent, demanding. His intensity is evident on his face, in his posture, in his voice. But when he plays, his eyes drift and a peaceful energy flows through him as though he had injected heroin. With each addition of pain or restraint, he stiffens slightly, then falls into a deeper calm, a deeper peace, waiting to obey his mistress. “Some people have to be tied up to be free,” he says.

As James’ experience illustrates, sadomasochism involves a highly unbalanced power relationship established through role-playing, bondage, and/or the infliction of pain. The essential component is not the pain or bondage itself, but rather the knowledge that one person has complete control over the other, deciding what that person will hear, do, taste, touch, smell and feel. We hear about men pretending to be little girls, women being bound in a leather corset, people screaming in pain with each strike of a flogger or drip of hot wax. We hear about it because it is happening in bedrooms and dungeons across the country.

For over a century, people who engaged in bondage, beatings and humiliation for sexual pleasure were considered mentally ill. But in the 1980s, the [American Psychiatric Association](#) removed S&M as a category in its [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#).

This decision—like the decision to remove homosexuality as a category in 1973—was a big step toward the societal acceptance of people whose sexual desires aren’t traditional, or vanilla, as it’s called in S&M circles.

What's new is that such desires are increasingly being considered normal, even healthy, as experts begin to recognize their psychological value. S&M, they are beginning to understand, offers a release of sexual and emotional energy that people cannot get from traditional sex.

“The satisfaction gained from S&M is something far more than sex,” explains [Roy Baumeister, Ph.D.](#), a social psychologist at Case Western Reserve University “It can be a total emotional release.”

Although people report that they have better-than-usual sex immediately after a scene, the goal of S & M itself is not intercourse: “A good scene doesn't end in orgasm, it ends in catharsis.”

## **S&M: No Longer A Pathology**

“If children at [an] early age witness sexual intercourse between adults... they inevitably regard the sexual act as a sort of ill-treatment or act of subjugation: they view it, that is, in a sadistic sense.” [Sigmund Freud, 1905](#).

Freud was one of the first to discuss S & M on a psychological level. During the 20 years he explored the topic, his theories crossed each other to create a maze of contradictions. But he maintained one constant: S&M was pathological.

People become masochistic, Freud said, as a way of regulating their desire to sexually dominate others. The desire to submit, on the other hand, he said, arises from guilt feelings over the desire to dominate. He also argued that the desire for S & M can arise on its own when a man wants to assume the passive female role, with bondage and beating signifying being “castrated or copulated with, or giving birth.”

The view that S&M is pathological has been dismissed by the psychological community. Sexual sadism is a real problem, but it is a different phenomenon from S&M. [Luc Granger, Ph.D.](#), head of the department of psychology at the University of Montreal, created an intensive treatment program for sexual aggressors in La Macaza Prison in Quebec; he has also conducted research on the S&M community. “They are very separate populations,” he says. While S&M is the regulated exchange of power among consensual participants, sexual sadism is the derivation of pleasure from either inflicting pain or completely controlling an unwilling person.

Lily Fine, a professional dominatrix who teaches S&M workshops across North America, explains: “I may hurt you, but I will not harm you: I will not hit you too hard, take you further than you want to go or give you an infection.”

Despite the research indicating that S&M does no real harm and is not associated with pathology, Freud's successors in psychoanalysis continue to use mental illness overtones when discussing S&M. [Sheldon Bach, Ph.D.](#), clinical professor of psychology at York University and supervising analyst at the New York Freudian Society, maintains that people are addicted to S&M. They feel compelled to be “anally abused or crawl on their knees and lick a boot or a penis or who knows what else. The problem,” he continues, “is that they can't love. They are searching for love, and S & M is the only way they can try to find it because they are locked into sadomasochistic interactions they had with a parent.”

## Linking Childhood Memories And Adult Sex

“I can explore aspects of myself that I don’t get a chance to explore otherwise. So even though I’m playing a role, I feel more connected with myself.” [Leanne Custer M.S.W, AIDS counselor.](#)

[Meredith Reynolds, Ph.D., the Sexuality Research Fellow of the Social Science Research Council,](#) confirms that childhood experiences may shape a person’s sexual outlook.

“Sexuality doesn’t just arise at puberty,” she says. “Like other parts of someone’s personality, sexuality develops at birth and takes a developmental course through a person’s life span.”

In her work on sexual exploration among children, Reynolds has shown that while childhood experiences can indeed influence adult sexuality, the effects usually “wash out” as a person gains more sexual experience. But they can linger in some people, causing a connection between childhood memories and adult sexual play. In that case, Reynolds says, “the childhood experiences have affected something in the personality, and that in turn affects adult experiences.”

Reynolds’ theory helps us develop a greater understanding of the desire to be a whip-bearing mistress or a bootlicking slave. For example, if a child has been taught to feel shame about her body and desires, she may learn to disconnect herself from them. Even as she gets older and gains more experience with sex, her personality may retain some part of that need for separation. S&M play may act as a bridge: Lying naked on a bed bound to the bedposts with leather restraints, she is forced to be completely sexual. The restraint, the futility of struggle, the pain, the master’s words telling her she is such a lovely slave—these cues enable her body to fully connect with her sexual self in a way that has been difficult during traditional sex.

Marina is a prime example. She knew from the time she was 6 years old that she was expected to succeed in school and sports. She learned to focus on achievement as a way to dismiss emotions and desires. “I learned very young that desires are dangerous,” she says. She heard that message in the behavior of her parents: a depressive mother who let her emotions overtake her, and an obsessively health-conscious father who compulsively controlled his diet.

When Marina began to have sexual desires, her instinct, cultivated by her upbringing, was to consider them too frightening, too dangerous. “So I became anorexic,” she says. “And when you’re anorexic, you don’t feel desire; all you feel in your body is panic.”

Marina didn’t feel the desire for S&M until she was an adult and had outgrown her eating disorder. “One night I asked my partner to put his hands around my neck and choke me. I was so surprised when those words came out of my mouth,” she says. If she gave her partner total control over her body she felt, she could allow herself to feel like a completely sexual being, with none of the hesitation and disconnection she sometimes felt during sex. “He wasn’t into it, but now I’m with someone who is,” Marina says. “S&M makes our vanilla sex better, too, because we trust each other more sexually and we can communicate what we want.”

## Escaping the Modern Western Ego

“Like alcohol abuse, binge eating and meditation, sadomasochism is a way people can forget themselves.” [Roy Baumeister, Ph.D., Professor of psychology, Case Western Reserve University](#).

It is human nature to try to maximize esteem and control: Those are two general principles governing the study of the self. Masochism runs contrary to both, and was therefore an intriguing psychological puzzle Baumeister, whose career has focused on the study of self and identity.

Through an analysis S&M-related letters to the sex magazine *Variations*, Baumeister came to believe that “masochism is a techniques for helping people temporarily lose their normal identity.” He reasoned that the modern Western ego is an incredibly elaborate structure, with our culture placing more demands on the individual self than any other culture in history. Such high demands increase the stress associated with living up to expectations and existing as the person you want to be. “That stress makes forgetting who you are an appealing escape,” Baumeister says. That is the essence of “escape” theory, one of the main reasons people turn to S&M.

“Nothing matters except you, me and the sound of my voice,” Lily Fine tells the tied-up and exposed businessman who begged to be spanked before breakfast. She says it slowly, making her slave wait for every sound, forcing him to focus only on her, to float in anticipation of the sensations she will create inside him. Anxieties about mortgages and taxes, stresses about business partners and job deadlines are vanquished each time the flogger hits the flesh. The businessman is reduced to a physical creature existing only in the here and now, feeling the pain and pleasure. “I’m interested in manipulating what’s in the mind,” Lily says. “The brain is the greatest erogenous zone.”

In another S&M scene, Lily tells a woman to take off her clothes, then dresses her only with a blindfold. She commands the woman not to move. Lily then takes a tissue and begins moving it over the woman’s body in different patterns and at varying speeds and angles. Sometimes she lets the edge of the tissue just barely brush the woman’s stomach and breasts; sometimes she bunches the tissue and creates swirls on her back and all the way down. “The woman was quivering. She didn’t know what I was doing to her, but she was liking it,” Lily remembers with a smile.

Escape theory is further supported by an idea called “frame analysis,” developed by the late [Irving Goffman, Ph.D.](#) According to Goffman, despite its popular conception as darkly wild and orgiastic, S&M play has complex rules, rituals, roles and dynamics that create a “frame” around the experience.

“Frames suspend reality. They create expectations, norms and values that set this situation apart from other parts of life,” confirms [Thomas Weinberg, Ph.D., a sociologist at Buffalo State College in New York](#) and the editor of *S & M: Studies in Dominance & Submission* ([Prometheus Books, 1995](#)). Once inside the frame, people are free to act and feel in ways they couldn’t at other times.

## **S&M: Part of the Sexual Continuum**

S&M has inspired the creation of many psychological theories in addition to the ones discussed here. Do we need so many? Perhaps not according to [Stephanie Saunders Ph.D.](#), associate director of the [Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction at Indiana University](#), “a lot of behaviors that are scrutinized because they are seen to be marginal are really a part of the continuum of sexuality and sexual behavior.”

After all, the ingredients in good S&M play-communication, respect and trust-are the same ingredients in good traditional sex. The outcome is the same, too-a feeling of connection to the body and the self.

[Laura Antoniou](#), a writer [work on S & M](#) has been published by [Masquerade Books in New York City](#), (Now published by [Mystic Rose](#)) puts it another way: “When I was a child, I had nothing but S&M fantasies. I punished Barbie for being dirty. I did Bondage Barbie, dominance with GI Joe. S&M is simply what turns me on.”